

Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment

Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge

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Prepared by

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Abbreviations

ARM	adaptive resource management
Administration Act	National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act
ATV	all-terrain vehicle
AUM	animal unit months
BP	before present
BLM	Bureau of Land Management
CCP	comprehensive conservation plan
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CWCS	comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy
districts	wetland management districts
DNRC	Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
EA	environmental assessment
FMP	fire management plan
FONSI	Finding of No Significant Impact
GIS	Geographic Information System
GS	general pay schedule
IBA	Important Bird Area
Improvement Act	National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997
MFWP	Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
MTNHP	Montana Natural Heritage Program
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NOI	notice of intent
PL	public law
PM₁₀	Particulate matter
refuge	Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge
Refuge System	National Wildlife Refuge System
RONs	Refuge Operating Needs System
RMP	Rocky Mountain population
SAV	submerged aquatic vegetation
sandhills	Centennial Sandhills
Service	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S.	United States
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
USFWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
USGS	U.S. Geological Survey
WCS	water control structure
WG	wage grade pay schedule
WMD	wetland management district
WPA	waterfowl production area
WPA	Works Progress or Project Administration
WUI	wildland-urban interface

Definitions of these and other terms are in the glossary, located after Chapter 6.

Summary

The following summary provides a brief overview of this draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment for Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, including (1) a general description; (2) purposes of the refuge; (3) vision and goals; (4) alternatives considered, including the proposed action; and (5) the decision to be made regarding the proposed comprehensive conservation plan.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has developed this draft comprehensive conservation plan to provide a foundation for the management and use of Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. This refuge is one of the most remote in the lower 48. It is located in the Centennial Valley in southwestern Montana in Beaverhead County, 47 miles west of West Yellowstone and 38 miles east of the town of Lima. This 47,756-acre refuge sits at 6,670 feet above sea level and lies east of the Continental Divide near the uppermost reach of the Missouri drainage.

Historically, management focused on protecting and enhancing the trumpeter swan population at the refuge. In the 1930s, the refuge was their last known breeding location. Today, swans can still be seen breeding in the valley, but the intensive management of swan populations (through feeding and raising young) has been altered in favor of allowing the swans to thrive under mostly natural conditions.

The refuge has one of the most naturally diverse areas in the National Wildlife Refuge System. The refuge boasts the largest wetland complex within the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem as well as expansive tracts of grassland and sagebrush-steppe habitats and a small amount of midelevation forested areas. These habitats support over 200 species of birds, including peregrine falcons, bald eagles, short-eared owls, sandhill cranes, sage grouse, and numerous species of waterfowl and waterbirds. Common mammals include Shiras moose, elk, mule and white-tailed deer, badger, coyote, and red fox. In addition, wolves and grizzly bears have been documented using the refuge in recent years. There is also a remnant population of native lacustrine/adfluvial Arctic grayling that occur on the refuge. This population lives in the lake and breeds in the river.

A full-time staff of five employees and various summer temporaries manage and study the refuge habitats and maintain visitor facilities. Domestic livestock grazing and prescribed fire are the primary management tools used to maintain and enhance upland habitats. Currently, four grazing cooperators are using refuge lands. Water level manipulation occurs in some areas of the refuge to improve wetland habitats.

Approximately 12,000 people visit the refuge annually. Two refuge roads and three county roads that pass through the refuge account for the majority of visitor use. The refuge is open to limited fishing, with the majority of fishing occurring on Red Rock Creek. In addition, the refuge is open to limited hunting of ducks, geese, coots, elk, pronghorn, moose, mule deer, and white-tailed deer.

ESTABLISHMENT HISTORY

On April 22, 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Red Rock Lakes Migratory Waterfowl Refuge (later named “Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge” on July 19, 1961) under Executive Order 7023 “as a refuge and breeding ground for wild birds and animals.” On September 4, 1935, President Roosevelt enlarged the refuge under Executive Order 7172 “provided, that any private lands within the areas described shall become a part of the refuge upon the acquisition of title or lease thereto by the United States.”

During the 70 years since the executive boundary was established, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has continued to acquire lands from willing landowners or receive land donations. The Service currently owns 47,756 acres within this approved boundary.

LEGISLATIVE PURPOSES

Every refuge has a purpose for which it was established. The purpose is the foundation upon which to build all refuge programs, from biology and visitor services, to maintenance and facilities. No action undertaken by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or public may conflict with this refuge purpose. The refuge purposes are found in the legislative acts or administrative orders that provide the authorities to either transfer or acquire a piece of land for a refuge. Over time, an individual refuge

may contain lands that have been acquired under a variety of transfer and acquisition authorities, giving a refuge more than one purpose. The goals, objectives, and strategies identified in the draft comprehensive conservation plan are intended to support individual purposes for which the refuge was established.

The legislative purposes for Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge include the following:

1. “As a refuge and breeding ground for wild birds and animals.” (Executive Order 7023, dated April 22, 1935)
2. “For use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.” (Migratory Bird Conservation Act)
3. “Suitable for (a) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, (b) the protection of natural resources, (c) the conservation of endangered species or threatened species ... the Secretary ... may accept and use ... real ... property. Such acceptance may be accomplished under the terms and conditions of restrictive covenants imposed by donors.” (Refuge Recreation Act)
4. “The conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions.” (Emergency Wetlands Resources Act)
5. “For the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources ... for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services. Such acceptance may be subject to the terms of any restrictive or affirmative covenant, or condition of servitude.” (Fish and Wildlife Act)

REFUGE VISION

The vision for Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is based on the establishing purposes of the refuge, resource conditions and potential, and the issues identified during the planning process (see Section 2.2).

The majestic Centennial Valley of southwest Montana is an expansive mosaic of mountain wetlands, grasslands, shrub lands, and forests framed by dramatic mountain peaks. Through partnerships and conservation programs, the valley has maintained its biological integrity and is a working landscape that remains largely undeveloped.

To this end, the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is a conservation leader in the valley

working to maintain and restore natural processes to create and sustain native habitat for migratory and resident fish and wildlife. Visitors have a sense of solitude and wildness that lifts their spirits and stirs their souls. This first-hand experience with the refuge encourages people to participate as stewards, not only of the refuge, but also of the natural resources in their own communities.

REFUGE GOALS

The goals described below help the staff achieve the vision for Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

LAKE, POND, AND MARSH HABITAT GOAL

Provide habitat for breeding and migrating birds, native fishes, and resident wildlife that maintains the biological diversity and integrity of montane wetland systems.

RIPARIAN HABITAT GOAL

Maintain the processes necessary to sustain the biological diversity and integrity of native riparian vegetation for breeding birds, native fishes, and wintering ungulates.

WET MEADOW, GRASSLAND, AND SHRUB-STEPPE HABITAT GOAL

Provide structurally complex native meadow, grassland, and shrub-steppe habitats, within a watershed context, for sagebrush-dependent species, upland-nesting migratory birds, rare plant species, and other resident wildlife.

ASPEN FOREST, MIXED CONIFEROUS FOREST, AND WOODLAND HABITAT GOAL

Create and maintain aspen stands of various age classes within a mosaic of coniferous forest and shrub land for cavity-nesting birds and other migratory and resident wildlife.

VISITOR SERVICES AND CULTURAL RESOURCES GOAL

Provide quality wildlife-dependent recreation, interpretation, and outreach opportunities that nurture an appreciation and understanding of the unique natural and cultural resources of the Centennial Valley, for visitors and local community members of all abilities, while maintaining the primitive and remote experience unique to the refuge.

REFUGE OPERATIONS GOAL

Prioritize for wildlife first and emphasize the protection of trust resources in the utilization of staff, funding, and volunteer programs.

ALTERNATIVES

ALTERNATIVE A: NO ACTION

Alternative A, the no-action alternative, reflects the current habitat management of the refuge. It provides the baseline against which to compare other alternatives. It is also a requirement of the National Environmental Protection Act that a no-action alternative be addressed in the planning process.

ALTERNATIVE B: PROPOSED ACTION

Management under alternative B acknowledges the importance of naturally functioning ecological communities on the refuge. However, changes to the landscape (for example, human alterations to the landscape, created wetlands, and species in peril requiring special management actions) prevent management of the refuge solely as a naturally functioning ecological community. Because some of these changes can be significant, some refuge habitats would require “hands on” management actions during the life of this plan. Visitor services programs (such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, outreach, and interpretation programs) would be improved and expanded while maintaining the wilderness characteristics of the refuge.

ALTERNATIVE C: WETLAND RESTORATION

Management under alternative C acknowledges the importance of a naturally functioning ecosystem. Management action emphasis would be placed on allowing wetland and riparian habitats to function naturally through the restoration of most created and all modified wetlands and elimination of all water management structures. Visitor services programs (such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, outreach, and interpretation programs) would be improved and expanded while maintaining the wilderness characteristics of the refuge.

ALTERNATIVE D: ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

Management under alternative D further acknowledges the importance of a naturally functioning ecosystem. Management action emphasis would be placed on the restoration of all natural processes, including the restoration of all wetland and riparian habitats. The refuge would participate in state programs to reintroduce bison if they become designated as free-ranging wildlife. Also, the refuge

would place emphasis on creating a wilderness setting in all areas away from refuge headquarters. Visitor services programs would promote a wilderness experience with little to no signage or interpretation

DECISION TO BE MADE

The environmental assessment describes and analyzes four alternatives for achieving the above goals. Based on this analysis, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's regional director for region 6 (Mountain-Prairie Region) will decide which alternative will be selected to manage the refuge for the next 15 years.

